

# JMU: Official's Letter On Zoning Issue Not Official

By ELLIE POTTER

*Daily News-Record*

July 28, 2017

**HARRISONBURG** — It was signed by a James Madison University official, along with her title.

It was on official JMU letterhead.

But a letter about a rezoning request before City Council from Rebecca Carbaugh, coordinator of off-campus life, did not reflect the university's official position on a proposed mixed-use development along South Main Street just south of Port Republic Road, campus officials say.

## **Not For College Students**

Tabled by council on July 11, the project would replace single-family homes with retail space, restaurants and up to 22 one-bedroom apartments.

In her July 10 letter to council and residents of the Purcell Park neighborhood, Carbaugh said Harrisonburg has no need for more off-campus student housing.

"Additional apartment-based housing is not needed at this point in the community, and might actually be detrimental to current properties who are having difficulty reaching capacity with tenants and profiting," the letter says.

There's at least one problem with Carbaugh's assessment, according to Dick Blackwell, founder of Blackwell Engineering, which is assisting developer Giles Stone.

"These apartments are not designed for college students," Blackwell wrote in a July 18 letter to Mark Warner, senior vice president of student affairs at JMU. "Whereas, students may use the proposed commercial establishments, it seems unlikely many, if any, will choose to occupy the proposed one- bedroom apartments."

Stone owns five parcels in that neighborhood that front South Main Street, East Weaver Avenue and Edgelawn Drive. He requested the properties be rezoned from professional and low- density residential to high- density zoning.

Dozens of nearby property owners objected to the proposal, saying it would negatively affect the neighborhood and would further reduce availability of single-family housing.

In voting to table the request, council members said they wanted to give Stone and neighbors more time to reach a compromise.

On seeing Carbaugh's letter, Harrisonburg officials sought clarification as to whether it reflected JMU's opinion on the development, City Attorney Chris Brown said.

Warner said in a July 18 email to City Manager Kurt Hodgen that JMU is not taking a stance. The university does not take positions on rezoning requests "that don't directly impact the university," he wrote.

Bill Wyatt, JMU's director of communications, said he does not know why Carbaugh wrote the letter.

"That letter, it is not authorized by the university," Wyatt said Thursday. "The university does not have a position on that project. That is her own personal opinion and does not represent the views of the university."

Carbaugh also wrote a letter dated July 24 to City Council and Stone clarifying her previous letter. She wrote that though she does work at JMU, the letter represented only her opinion and did not speak for the university.

She did not get approval before making the statement and placing it on her JMU office letterhead, she wrote.

"I do apologize for the way in which my own personal and professional opinion was delivered, especially as I have no knowledge of JMU's official position on this re-zoning request," she wrote. "I did not intend to falsely represent the JMU opinion and stance on this project, and hope this letter serves as a way to amend to some degree my poor professional judgment in this matter."

Carbaugh declined to comment Thursday.

Stone also did not want to comment.

Mayor Deanna Reed said Carbaugh's letter was "unfortunate," but she was pleased the council received two apology letters, Carbaugh's and one from Jim McConnel, associate vice president of student life and involvement at JMU.

"We accept the letters," Reed said, "and we're just going to move forward."

Contact Ellie Potter at 574-6286 or [epotter@dnronline.com](mailto:epotter@dnronline.com)